



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon August 15, 2021 Sermon: “The Wisdom of a Loving Home” Rev. David Jones

This will give you a little bit of a glimpse behind the scenes here at church. I do write our sermons (usually), but there are several other sometimes hidden pairs of hands that pull our whole service together, and one pair of hands in particular, Bruce Bennett’s, are responsible for transforming the various, disparate elements of worship into one cohesive worship bulletin. On a busy Saturday like I had yesterday, this means in practice that I will need to supply Bruce a sermon title before I have actually finished the sermon. Our title today was considered, it was a reflection of conversations I have had this week with congregants, and it was intended to link our opening prayers with our scriptures...but to be honest, I wasn’t sure when I got this title to Bruce just what exactly it would have to do with the sermon.

But lately I have been having a new feeling for me, a new faith experience. I know this is not always the case, and we should be so careful using the phrase, but lately I have felt that some things are just meant to be. We can make plans, we can think things through, we can be deliberate and discerning and wise, and we can qualify everything we say and everything we write--but sometimes there are just these things that happen, that defy all of that, and yet can make all the difference, as if they were just *meant to be*.

There was the woman I wrote about recently in *The Recorder*, the elderly woman who needed support as she sat in a hospital room awaiting test results. I arrived at her door as a chaplain, which was the last thing she felt she needed. She wasn’t religious, and anyway I was too young, she told me. But then it turned out she had driven trucks all her life, and I had recently been loading trucks in Jacksonville, and we instantly connected. I was able to support her not because I was a chaplain, certainly not because of my religion or my prayers or because I could quote scripture; I was able to support her, maybe uniquely, because I had loaded the same kind of long-haul trucks she once drove.

Or there was the wedding yesterday. I heard a story and shared it as part of the service, about how the groom’s father had lost his own wedding ring at work, over 20 years ago, digging in the trenches of a major housing development project--it slipped off as he worked--and then how 20 years later, somehow, miraculously, the wedding ring was returned to him because people living in the houses that eventually were built there, unearthed the ring while they gardened one day in their backyard.

And then this sermon title. I gave it to Bruce before I had learned that a member of our church and a dear friend of Bruce and Diana’s, Randy, passed away yesterday afternoon. As many of you know, Randy lived with Bruce and Diana here in Ashfield for 20 years. Diana was coordinating his medical care, and over the years they both introduced him to our church. And they got to know him pretty well. Randy, who had a complicated life, and maybe wasn’t sure of his place in our community when he arrived, ended up volunteering at the Food Pantry and supporting our “Sharing Christmas” project. Those of us who are newer to this community might not know this history; Randy lived in the valley the last 12 years or so. But for 32 years, Bruce and Diana have had this important relationship, this important friendship; they had the strength, the patience, the wisdom to make a loving home for Randy, who was only 24 when he first came to live with them. He died yesterday still a young man in his 50s.

“Some things are meant to be,” is the phrase...In the past I’ve always tried to avoid sayings like this. Because life is complicated, and these little phrases can seem to try to tidy things too quickly. Certainly Randy, no more than any of us, was not *meant* to experience such hardship, such illness and injury in this life. That’s not what a loving God intends, that’s not what love set out for when it swayed back and forth until it could gain the momentum to spill over and bring all things into being. We were not made for suffering or pain, we were made for life and for love. And so to say “some things are meant to be”—I mean only that, *some* things, not all things. The woman in the hospital was not meant to be sick, but she was meant to find a person who could listen to her and relate to her. The wedding ring was never meant to be lost, but it was meant to be found, like Randy, who was meant to be found by Bruce and Diana.

Love is meant to be, not fear. But what is intended can have unintended consequences. Because when love just is, when it overflows—like a young couple getting married, or like when a couple invites a young man in need of care to live with them—love races right ahead, it makes a life, it cannot be contained, it cannot be dissuaded because of a housing development or a lost ring. Love does not look ahead and see that it will make every loss more palpable, that it will make every illness more unbearable...love does not look ahead and discover how high the stakes are and then back away from the table, fold its hand and dissolve. No, love does not stop when it glimpses these things on the horizon. However it may change, ever since this earth was made love has pressed on.

In the beginning, love was fearless and so it came into being. How else could it have? And we all came into being with it, beloved creatures of an endlessly and recklessly loving Creator. But then an awful thing happens: love saddles us with these terrible fears. Because we love, we are afraid to lose our friend, or a parent, or a pet. Because we love, we are afraid to lose who we each are, to a world that too often wants us to conform and fit in. Because we love, we are afraid to lose this glorious light. Because we are the children of love, we are bound to love. And I’m afraid that this means we are also bound to experience fear.

In our first scripture reading, Solomon is afraid. He is afraid that he cannot fulfill the duties of a king, afraid to try and do so in the shadow of his father’s death. And in our second reading, the Psalmist also says he is afraid, that he fears God. We know they are both afraid because they have love in their heart, as we do today. And they both respond the same way: Solomon asks for wisdom, and the Psalmist claims that the fear of God “*is the beginning of wisdom.*” If our love brings about fears, the task now becomes to make sure that our fears will bring about wisdom.

But what is wisdom? Solomon gives us one example. God meets Solomon in his dream, hearing that Solomon wishes only to do right by a great people; Solomon wishes to serve his nation well, to lead each person to each other, to create a beloved and secure community. And because God sees that Solomon’s fears are based on his love for the people he will serve, God grants him the practical wisdom he is seeking. Our ability to serve each other well, to care for all our people, is determined by our willingness to have love for all people. First comes love, creative and reckless, then its many fears of loss, then comes the practice of wisdom, the work of making and keeping a loving home for all.

But our church, especially this morning, we do not need this ancient example. Because we are blessed by the wisdom of Bruce and Diana. And their wisdom reminds us of the wisdom of Satch and Delta, and their team of volunteers, who also recently worked with another member in our community to protect a loving home.

I’m afraid that we will have more fears in this life than we were meant to have; even one is more than God meant for us. But God is love, and love could not and can not be contained. So it is up to us, together, to make sure that our fear—our reverence, our awe, our faith—of the God who is love, becomes the beginning of wisdom again and again, until our wisdom has made a loving home for us all.

Alleluia and amen.